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Carrots and Sticks in U.S.-Soviet Ties

American Policy Should Offer a Clear Choice

By ERNEST CONINE

President Reagan and his advisers are entitled to be as puzzled as anyone else about the latest reports of a power struggle within the Soviet ruling class. Western intelligence services are not privy to reliable information on the inner workings of Kremlin politics.

That makes it all the more important to pursue a two-track policy toward the Soviet Union—offering rewards as well as punishments on the odd chance that the Soviet leadership may one day be in a mood for realistic accommodation.

At present, the Administration does not appear to be on this wavelength.

Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet president, is 75 years old and has been in ill health for so long that the guessing game as to his successor has become a bore. Still, sooner or later he has to go—and there are intriguing suggestions from Moscow that the maneuvering may already have begun.

Among other things, the deputy head of the KGB secret police—who also happens to be Brezhnev's brother-in-law—is said to have committed suicide as the result of an internal brouhaha over the handling of a corruption investigation.

Galina Brezhnev, the Soviet leader's daughter, is married to a high-ranking official of the MVD police, which the KGB is said to suspect of involvement in widespread corruption.

Ten days after the death of the KGB official, the KGB arrested one "Boris the Gypsy," a man of mysterious wealth who was a frequent dinner companion of Galina Brezhnev. Boris is said to have implicated Brezhnev's daughter in illicit diamond dealing.

The fact that stories so damaging to Brezhnev's prestige are circulating semi-openly in Moscow is a spectacular departure from the norm; it wouldn't be happening if something unusual were not going on in the Kremlin's higher echelons.

What it all means in terms of U.S.-Soviet relations remains a puzzle. It's likely that Brezhnev's immediate successor will be no improvement from the Western viewpoint, but it is always possible that the leadership transition will provide an opportunity for beneficial change.

It isn't at all certain that people exist within the Kremlin's ruling circles who argue for a different set of national economic priorities —one calling for less military spending and more investment in the modernization of agriculture and industry, and therefore for a period of good behavior in Soviet relations with the West.

Nor is it clear, if such people do exist, what Washington could do to tilt Soviet political evolution in their favor.

What the Reagan Administration can do is make it repeatedly clear that American policy offers the Soviet Union a choice between confrontation and cooperation—and that, anytime Moscow is ready to choose the road of cooperation, we are prepared to help make the choice worthwhile.

The carrot-and-stick idea is hardly new. In one guise or another, it has been the policy of every U.S. President for 30 years.

For the formula to work, however, the stick has to be credible; otherwise, the carrot loses its ability to influence Soviet behavior, too. In essence, this was the argument made by the incoming Reagan Administration for higher military expenditures.

Over the years, U.S. military strength had declined relative to that of the Soviets. American policies, the Reagan team explained, had to be calculated to persuade the Soviets that the United States would not accept military inferiority—period. Only when Moscow accepted that fact, the new President suggested, would it be possible to limit nuclear arms and perhaps even to reduce their number.

This is a legitimate argument—given the realities of what the Soviet government is like—as long as the American side honestly keeps its eyes and ears open for signs of give on the Soviet side. Otherwise, the announced policy becomes nothing more than an open-ended prescription for confrontationist policies. Sticks without carrots are as useless as carrots without sticks.

There is no question that the Soviet economy is under severe strain, and that the lopsided investment in military strength is a root cause of the problem.

No one can say with confidence when or if Brezhnev or his successors will make the decision to cut military spending. But Washington plainly should not make it easy for the hardest of hard-liners in Moscow to argue that the door is closed to the kind of accommodation that would make a shift in priorities acceptable within the Soviet political context.

A few days ago, Brezhnev reiterated his willingness to resume the strategic arms limitation talks with the United States. The Soviet Union, he said, is willing to accept a halt in the production, testing and stockpil-

Sure. The Soviet leader's purpose probably was to divert attention from the events in Poland, to blunt the moves (such as they are) toward Western economic sanctions against the Soviet Union and the Polish military regime, and to undermine Reagan's rearmament program. The Russians probably figure that successful negotiations are not necessary in order to accomplish these objectives, that the mere negotiating process will bring the desired pressures on Washington.

The Reagan Administration is under no obligation to be naive. But there are two good reasons that it should not have dismissed the Brezhnev statement as abruptly as it did.

One has to do with domestic and alliance politics. With the movement for a nuclear freeze steadily gaining adherents here and abroad, the President should not allow himself to seem less sensitive to the issue than the Soviet leader.

But the real reason is substantive. It is always conceivable that there is a serious intent behind a Soviet overture, that a genuine signal is being sent.

After all, the Soviet Union has already achieved parity with the United States in strategic nuclear weapons. Purely in terms of its national security, Moscow could afford to accept a nuclear freeze of the sort suggested by Brezhnev.

Such a freeze could be used, if the Kremlin chose, to finance at least a temporary shift in resources to the hard-pressed civilian sector of the Soviet economy.

We don't know how the Administration reacted in private to the Brezhnev statement. But in public it was dismissed as propaganda flimflam.

It probably was. But it would have been better to couple skepticism with a clear public expression of willingness to sit down and discuss what the Soviet leader had in mind—Poland notwithstanding.

As a President whose skepticism toward the Russians is well established, Reagan could afford to demonstrate open-mindedness without running the risk of looking soft or gullible either to the Kremlin or to the American people.

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